Honoring Blood Cancer Survivors

Meet Cameron Ford. At 12, she was diagnosed with multiple myeloma. She's now 27 and cancer-free. Here, she shares advice for survivors.

July 10, 2023 By Leukemia & Lymphoma Society

By E. Anders Kolb, MD

Throughout June, in commemoration of #NationalCancerSurvivorMonth, we at LLS [highlighted] the resilience and achievements of blood cancer survivors. I've treated so many incredible young survivors in my years as a pediatric hematologist oncologist, and all of them hold a special place in my heart.

Today I'd like to introduce you to one of those extraordinary individuals, Cameron Ford. I met Cameron when she was just twelve and newly diagnosed with multiple myeloma, a rare diagnosis for someone so young. Now age twenty-seven and cancer-free, Cameron has been a bright light in my life and an inspiration to all who've had the good fortune to know her. I feel lucky that I not only got to be her doctor, but that I've witnessed so many of her life milestones—from treatment through remission to her motivational speaking as an LLS Honored Hero and as a Youth Advisory Council Member at Nemours/Alfred I. duPont Hospital for Children. It was a joy to attend her wedding in 2020, and what a thrill it is to now see her embark on a career as an occupational therapy assistant.

Like so many survivors of pediatric blood cancer, Cameron has had complications and lifelong health issues caused by the harsh treatments used to save her, which is why LLS's Dare to Dream Project strives to transform treatment and care for children with blood cancer. But through all her setbacks, she remained positive and future focused. She's a great example of what it means to survive and thrive.

I asked Cameron to share her experience and best advice for survivors and those who care for them. I know you'll be moved by her words of wisdom below.

CAMERON'S STORY

Diagnosis and Treatment: "In 2008, I returned home from summer camp feeling exhausted, breathless and in excruciating pain. It turns out I had a massive tumor encroaching on my lung. At

first the doctors thought it was isolated, but after surgery and removal of my rib we discovered that cancer was in my blood and all my bones. It was multiple myeloma—something the hospital had only seen one other time in pediatrics. They didn't even have treatment standards for a child so young. I'd need several cycles of chemotherapy, full body radiation and then two stem cell transplants. Here I was, 12 years old, going into middle school and being told that when I started chemo I'd have to stop going to choir, volleyball and church events. I'm a very social person and that hit me hard."

Make-or-Break Moment: "I spent six weeks in the transplant unit after the second transplant, and it was really touch and go for a while. My ANC blood count, which measures the number of white blood cells that fight infection, was zero. I remember seeing my reflection in the hospital's bathroom mirror looking so sick, and telling myself, 'You have to fight this!' And I did. I slowly healed and my blood count eventually went up. With the support of my family, and my incredible team of medical professionals, I made it through!"

Sometimes laughter really is the best medicine: "Humor got me through some of my most frustrating moments in the hospital—especially Dr. Andy's goofy sense of humor. I remember feeling really mad and calling him a doody head one day. He said, 'You know, that's a game," and next thing I knew he was wearing a Velcro beanie and giving me stuffed fake poops to throw at him. He called it, 'throwing crap' at him. It was pretty hilarious and got my mind off my illness!"

Dealing with Ongoing Challenges: "Even though I was declared cancer free at the age of 14, I've had many health problems tied to my treatment. I struggled with Graft-Versus-Host Disease (GVHD) after my transplant. I had a knee replacement at age 17 because the steroids used with chemo caused my femur to collapse. And in my first semester of college, I needed surgery to remove a clot from an artery in my heart. Even today, I have very low stamina and chronic digestive issues—not to mention a giant bald spot on top of my head. And I sometimes feel survivor's guilt, wondering why I'm still here when many didn't make it. But then I realize I'm here for a purpose: to help others understand that we need to keep working toward finding newer, less harsh treatments for pediatric cancer."

Best Advice: "Don't let cancer and the after-effects rule your life. I get indigestion from a lot of foods, but I don't let it stop me from eating buffalo wings, cause I love buffalo wings. I'm tired all the time but I still do the things I want to do, like hiking with my mom, even if I can only do a short distance. I take active trips and vacations, even if I'm not sure whether I'll be able to fully participate. And I run around and play with my nieces and kids from my church's children's ministry, even though I know my knee might hurt later. Yeah, I had cancer but I'm not going to let it control my life! I'm going to celebrate all I've accomplished as a survivor. I got to get married in the middle of the pandemic! And I now have the best job in the world, working with preschoolers who bring me joy every day. I got a second lease on life and I'm going to make sure I use it to better myself and those around me!"

This article was originally published June 30, 2023, by The Leukemia & Lymphoma Society. It is republished with permission.